

A covenant is a solemn promise made between two or more parties to fulfill a declared purpose in a relationship. It is a term that is in common usage in the church today.

History and Background

In the Old Testament “berit” described God’s way of relating to the world (Genesis 9:8-17) and to Israel (Exodus 24:3-8). God was bound in loyalty through an act of grace. The relationship reshaped all of life. From the time the covenant was made, neither party was able to disregard the other. While there were disobedience and mistrust on the part of Israel, there was also the remaking of new promise, vows and commitments.

In the New Testament Jesus is at the center of the covenant. God is bound to the people of God through Jesus. Jesus’ suffering and death disclose how fully God honors the covenant. In Jesus we can see not only God’s faithfulness but how humans can relate to God.

The Old Testament helps us realize that we are not just any people, but we are God’s people. God calls us to obedience and we trust God. Like Israel, we have broken the covenant from time to time, and by God’s grace and our renewed intentions, we experience faith gained by renewal of obedience to God and God’s trustworthiness.

While we may fail to recognize the full force of God’s presence in Christ, each time we drink the cup of the new covenant in communion, we are called to be God’s people in Christ. We are called to obedience and trust.

Both the Old and New Testaments (the old and new covenants) affirm that God’s covenant is the impetus for the formation of community. We live not only in covenant with God but with one another on behalf of God’s world all around us. That is why a very early covenant of the church in a new land (Salem Covenant of 1629) begins, “We covenant with the Lord and one another...”

Whenever a solemn agreement between people is one that is also made with God, the depths of relationships are qualitatively different. It’s very different to be God’s people as sisters and brothers in Christ than to be members of a club.

Covenant was an important concept in the Reformation. The leaders of the Reformation pointed to the importance of covenanting with God and one another to be a people of God. They believed that the integrity of being a people of God is tied to being in covenant with God more than in being tied to an institutional form of the church.

Covenant means that God has chosen to be limited. God has chosen to enter into an interdependent and intimate partnership with others whose growth in obedience and trust

is a key factor (1 Corinthians 3). The idea that God partly relies on us to bring about God’s purpose places a matter of urgency on our role in the partnership.

Covenants are alive today. When people join the church they are covenanting with other members. Local churches, associations, conferences and the General Synod are in covenant relationships. Churches make covenants with other churches to work together ecumenically. This means that those who enter into the covenants have an implicit covenant with God and with each other. These covenants affect their lives.

Why Covenant Is Important Today

There are several reasons why covenant is an important term for the United Church of Christ today.

It may be that we seek freshness in faith and faithfulness in the wake of independent individualism and self-sufficiency. God calls us to a new possibility in covenant, therefore covenant becomes an exciting alternative.

We tend to be interdependent today when it suits our particular need. This can be as true for a congregation, church member or national body of the church as it is for a group within a congregation, a conference or an association. Rather than being in covenant, we come close to having

contracts. “If you pay your pledge, we will pay for a Christian education program for your children.” “If you provide us with help when we are looking for a pastor, we will take your counsel about Our Church’s Wider Mission.” Contracts, however stated, are agreements that one party will receive a form of payment for services rendered or goods received. People may be tired of dealing with others on a contractual basis.

It may be that we feel that God is not at the center of our decision making. We may have reached a point at which we are effective in governing and politicking as a democratic organization but feel that God did not vote.

It may be that God is intervening and that the Holy Spirit is calling attention to God’s desire and need for us to be faithful in a new age. Futurists suggest various possibilities, many of which indicate that humankind is unprepared. God may well be calling our attention to covenant in order that we be prepared to live in the future.

In our form of polity, lacking a hierarchy to give it order, we may see covenant as the best way to understand how to relate to one another and to achieve order in a faithful manner.

Implications

The danger we face is that we hear the word **covenant** but don’t do much about it. In the past, concern about

covenant occurred at times of great importance. Could the resurgence of this concept be preparing people today for something special? Where will it lead us ecumenically?

Where could it lead us in serving human need?

- In order for covenants to be understood, partners need to talk with one another to clarify meaning and expectations. When was the last time you had a conversation about what it means to be in covenant as a member of your church? When did conferences and national bodies of the United Church of Christ talk about their covenant? Covenants need renewal and that takes time. What might you do in your church to renew covenants?
- God not only needs to be part of the covenant, but we need to see God in and through Christ as the grace that allows covenants to be made. Talk about covenants needs to focus on faithfulness to that which God wants to happen.
- Only God's trustworthiness is steadfast. We do break covenants made with God and with one another. Our task is to challenge and support one another so that we can be obedient in our covenants.

Issues Facing the Church

- Do we see covenant as a way to hold others accountable, but not ourselves?
- Is covenant a convenient thing to lift up when we notice a lack of order?
- How do you acknowledge that you are bound in a covenant rather than a contract?

Questions

- How does your church understand its covenant with the wider expressions of the United Church of Christ, such as your association and conference? When and how are they developed and renewed?
- To what degree do you agree with the possible reasons for interest in covenant today suggested above? What do you think are the reasons?
- Which implications do you think we need to take seriously? Do you think there are others to consider?

Resources

In 2005, Parish Life and Leadership published a draft of the first section of a resource on covenant called "Manual on Church." This section describes the covenantal relationship between the local church and the association of which it is a member. Local Churches and Associations are encouraged to review and engage with this resource

and give feedback on this and future sections.